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ABSTRACT

Charter schools have emerged as the latest model for school reform. This handbook contextualizes the emergence of the charter-school concept by examining both the broader political shift in educational governance toward local control and the more specific movement in school reform toward greater institutional autonomy and school-based change. The discussion focuses solely on the emergence of the charter-school concept and its relationship to past school-reform efforts and the current movement to alter educational governance. Borrowing from the first and second waves of reform, the charter-school concept embodies the values most central to school improvement in the last decade--accountability, school-based change, teacher professionalism, and school choice. The book suggests that the charter-school concept provides opportunities for school-based change, teacher empowerment, and accountability that past reforms did not. (Contains 39 references.) (LMI)

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Redefining Education Governance:

The Charter School Concept

by

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Introduction

Charter schools have emerged as the latest—and perhaps the most radical—model for school reform. In an effort to balance both autonomy and accountability, the concept of charter schools suggests a fundamentally different approach to school management that allows individual schools to govern themselves in exchange for achieving specific goals set forth in an educational charter or contract (Wohlstetter, Wenning, & Briggs, in press). As such, charter schools represent unprecedented opportunities for teachers, parents, and community members to not merely influence but to actually make decisions about how best to organize and operate schools to meet the needs of students. As schools of choice, charter schools also expand public school options for parents and encourage greater parental involvement in and responsibility for the education of their children. These features recently caused former Secretary of Education Terrel Bell (1995) to remark that, out of past reform efforts, "the charter-school idea has emerged as possibly the most promising innovation [yet]" (p. 40).

The widespread popularity of charter schools is reflected in the rapid proliferation of charter school laws across the country. In 1991, only Minnesota had enacted charter school legislation. By 1994, legislatures in eleven states had passed charter school initiatives. During legislative session 1995, more than 20 states considered charter school legislation. By July, at least eight had enacted laws authorizing the creation of charter schools—bringing a total of nineteen states into a reform movement that began a scant four years ago (Bierlein, 1995).

Four of the nineteen states with charter school legislation are located in SEDL's Southwestern Region. In 1993, New Mexico became the third state in the nation to enact a law authorizing the creation of charter schools. During general session 1995, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Texas followed suit. Oklahoma, the fifth state in SEDL's region, passed a study resolution concerning charter schools; the state legislature is expected to consider the results during the 1996 general session.

In contrast to traditional public schools, charter schools are created by way of a contract that is negotiated between a group of school organizers who develop and run the school and a sponsoring body that oversees the provisions of the charter. Organizers can be almost anyone—classroom teachers, parents, community members, institutions of higher education, or local businesses. Sponsors are typically local or state boards of education. Charter schools can be newly formed or formed from existing public and, in some cases, private institutions.

In their "purest" form, charter schools operate as legally and financially autonomous educational institutions (Bierlein, 1995; Bierlein & Mulholland, 1994). Charter schools are freed from most or all local and state regulations that could inhibit innovation. In exchange, charter school organizers agree to be held accountable for results by committing in their charter contracts to specific student outcomes and the means for attaining these outcomes. Contracts are granted for a finite period of time—usually three to five years—during which the sponsor and the state monitor the school's progress toward the outcomes designated in the contract. Renewal of the charter is based on the school's ability to provide evidence of students' achievement and to fulfill other terms of the contract.

In addition to being held accountable for results, charter schools are accountable to the demands of the educational marketplace. As schools of choice, they must respond effectively to the needs and preferences of students and parents. In order to meet these demands, charter schools are granted full authority over decisions regarding curriculum, personnel, and budget.

The promise and appeal of this new educational delivery system is largely based on a popular set of beliefs and assumptions about the efficacy of charter schools (McGree, 1995).

- Charter schools encourage innovation because they operate as independent and legally autonomous entities.
- Charter schools are more accountable and focus on results.
- Charter schools expand public school choice for all, but particularly for students at risk of academic failure.
- Charter schools provide new and increased professional opportunities for teachers.
- Charter schools require little additional funding or other resources to implement or sustain.
- Charter schools act as a catalyst for improvement throughout the entire public education system.

Although these central values of innovation, autonomy, accountability, choice, teacher professionalism, efficiency, and systemwide improvement are familiar themes in school reform, they have never before converged as the rationale for a single reform strategy. In charter schools, they do. The charter school concept embodies what reformers and educators have viewed as "best practice" over the last decade. Further, the concept is politically attractive and feasible in light of recent movements to redefine and create new governance structures for increased responsiveness and local control.

Purpose of the Document

Why has the charter school concept emerged in the United States and caught fire among state legislatures? And why now, at the end of a decade of intense reform efforts to improve our nation's schools?

The answers to these questions can be found in an examination of the two different but related contexts within which charter schools have emerged. First, charter schools have emerged at a time when the political landscape in America is undergoing transformation, and the role of government is being called into question (Mutchler, Mays, & Pollard, 1993). As the organization and management of publicly funded systems have fallen under close scrutiny, the public schools have not been exempt. At all levels, the governance of education is being redefined to emphasize stricter accountability for results and, concurrently, promote greater flexibility and responsiveness at the local level.

This new, more systemic transfer of decisionmaking authority in the political arena is paralleled by decentralizing themes which have long been prominent in education reform. With deep roots in movements toward greater school accountability, school-based change, increased teacher professionalism, and parental choice, charter schools also represent the culmination of a decade of education reform efforts designed to give local schools greater autonomy and flexibility to meet the needs of all students.

The purpose of this document is to contextualize the emergence of the charter school concept by examining both the broader political shift in educational governance toward local control and the more specific, but parallel, movement in school reform toward greater institutional autonomy and school-based change. Given these

parameters, the discussion focuses on charter schools in their "purest" form, as they have been conceptualized by reformers and scholars (Bierlein, 1995). The discussion does not attempt to address the numerous and critical issues that can arise in the implementation of charter schools, but instead focuses solely on the emergence of the charter school concept and its relationship to past school reform efforts and the current movement to alter educational governance.

Reinventing Government

At the broadest level, the emergence of charter schools can be seen as part of a larger political movement to fundamentally alter relationships between government and the governed. Currently, efforts are underway by Congress and the White House to "reinvent" government by downsizing bureaucracies, consolidating federal programs, increasing flexibility, and devolving decisionmaking authority to state and local levels. Governance of the public schools has not escaped this reinvention. Leaders in Washington are seeking ways to give states more flexibility and responsibility for the administration of federal education dollars. States, in turn, are granting local districts freedom from regulation in exchange for accountability for results. For their part, local districts have long been experimenting with programs and policies that transfer decisionmaking authority to individual school sites.

At the federal level, members on both ends of the political spectrum have proposed new ways to streamline and modernize the Department of Education. A 1993 report by the General Accounting Office (GAO) found evidence of mismanagement and inadequately trained staff. Compounding these problems, the workload has grown—the Department administers over 200 programs—while the staff has been reduced by 32 percent (cited in Lewis, 1993a). Moreover, the handling of programs has become increasingly fragmented; nearly 90 separate federal entities administer the major programs serving children and families. Further, the difficulties accompanying the use of federal funds result in burdensome paperwork and frustration for states and local districts. Not surprisingly, the GAO concluded that federal programs do little to facilitate or encourage innovation at the local level (Lewis, 1993b).

Finding ways to administer federal education dollars more effectively and efficiently through increased state control has become a bipartisan political priority in both executive and legislative offices. The Clinton Administration spearheaded three major federal actions in 1994—the *Goals 2000: Educate America Act*, the *Improving America's Schools Act of 1994* (reauthorizing and amending the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965*), and the *School-to-Work Opportunities Act*—all of which rely heavily on state plans to guide local efforts. These initiatives offer greater flexibility to states in the forms of broadened waiver authority and block grants for some programs. Increased state control over program management is intended to allow the federal government to focus its attention on the monitoring of high standards (Lewis, 1993c).

Conservative members of Congress have pushed for a more radical decentralization of authority. House budget proposals for 1995 have included dismantling the Department of Education and consolidating most federal education programs into block grants to be administered by the states. Under such a plan, most federal rules regarding the distribution of funds would be eliminated, although districts would be required to account for the use of federal money. Job-training and vocational education programs would be block granted and administered through the Department of Labor (Pitsch, 1995).

A similar devolution of government is occurring at the state level, where policymakers are seeking ways to provide

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local districts and schools with greater autonomy and freedom from burdensome state regulations. In 1995, the Texas legislature rewrote the state education code, eliminating rules and regulations viewed as unnecessary impediments to local control. Last year, the governors of California and Michigan both called for abolition of their state education codes. Accusing the state of "micromanagement," Governor Wilson proposed repealing California's eleven volume code and replacing it with a single volume that provides greater autonomy and site flexibility (Pipho, 1995a).

In keeping with themes of deregulation and local control, several states also are considering changes in their educational governance structures. A 1994 survey by the National Association of State Boards of Education found that at least a dozen states were considering legislation to abolish their state boards of education, and thirty were reviewing proposals to downsize or reorganize their departments of education (Pipho, 1995b). This trend toward decentralization of state power over education also underlies the recent push in Texas to allow school districts to be governed by "home-rule" rather than by state law and regulation (Brooks, 1995).

At the local level, changes in education governance have also been suggested. Until recently, school restructuring and other reform initiatives have generated relatively little discussion about the cornerstone local decisionmaking authority—school boards. Lately, however, there have been calls for a redefinition of roles and responsibilities that eliminates school board control over the daily operation of individual schools and instead emphasizes school board responsibility for the development, implementation, and oversight of district policy (Danzberger, 1994).

In contrast to these recent efforts to alter educational governance at the federal, state, and local levels, the redefinition of school-site governance has been occurring for some time. For nearly a decade, reformers have sought ways to effectively move the locus of control and accountability from the state and local districts to individual schools.

Education Reform: From State Mandate to Local Control

The last decade has witnessed the emergence of two distinct "waves" of education reform activity. The first wave was characterized by numerous state-level mandates which were designed to regulate and standardize the delivery of educational services in order to ensure high levels of quality and accountability for results. In contrast, second-wave reforms emphasized the need for radically "restructured" schools that operate with the flexibility and autonomy necessary to meet the increasingly diverse needs of students. Charter schools represent a culmination and extension of these two waves of reform by emphasizing accountability for results, school-based change, teacher professionalism, and choice.

The First Wave

In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education released a report that catapulted education into the national spotlight. Citing a "rising tide of mediocrity" in America's schools, *A Nation at Risk* called for a tougher curriculum, stricter performance standards for teachers and students, a longer school year, and incentives for teachers (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). In the wake of the report, more than 300 task forces and commissions were created to develop education reform proposals (O'Brien, 1994).

During the first wave of reform, blame for the poor performance of the nation's schools was placed squarely on the

shoulders of classroom teachers. Reform proposals repeatedly attributed declining student performance to low educational standards and poor-quality instruction. Between 1983 and 1985, state policymakers developed more than 700 pieces of legislation intended to raise the quality of instruction and make teachers more accountable for student performance. The legislation—designed to weed out incompetent teachers and retain talented ones—established proficiency standards, promoted alternative routes to teacher certification, and featured a variety of monetary incentives (e.g., merit pay scales, increased teacher salaries) to attract and keep high-quality teachers (Hanson, 1991).

At the same time, states began to develop and mandate standardized education policies and programs that would increase quality and also be impervious to tampering by teachers. Taking the recommendations of *A Nation at Risk* to heart, many states passed comprehensive, omnibus legislation that sought to regulate a wide array of educational practices, including graduation requirements, class size, the length of the school year, and state testing. As one researcher noted:

> To [state governments], turning the tide of the educational battle meant tighter ships, more able crew members and stricter rules of engagement (Hanson, 1994, p. 33).

By the mid-1980s, states had made significant progress toward their goals. A survey by the Education Commission of the States found that, in a few short years, states had made a number of dramatic changes. By 1986, 34 states had increased graduation requirements over 1980 levels, and five states had increased state control over these requirements. In addition, five states had increased the length of their school year, and five more were experimenting with increases in the length of the school day. Moreover, the number of states requiring testing for initial teacher certification totaled thirty, an increase of ten states since 1982 (Pipho, 1986).

While states had clearly been successful in mandating higher standards for both teachers and students, by the late 1980s it became clear that the new policies had failed to yield gains where they count—in the classroom. Although the percentage of high school students taking mathematics and science had increased dramatically, there was little evidence of increased student achievement in these academic disciplines (O'Brien, 1994).

State reformers soon realized that lasting improvements could not be made without the help of those most directly responsible for teaching and learning—classroom teachers.

The Second Wave

Although first-wave reform efforts to raise standards and increase accountability remained popular, by the late 1980s new approaches were being taken. If the first wave of reform was characterized by "top-down" reform strategies, the second wave emphasized a "bottom-up" approach. Once identified as the problem, teachers were now seen as the solution to the nation's educational problems. Reformers began calling for the empowerment rather than the management of teachers.

This new reliance on school-level personnel to reform education was part of a broader movement toward deregulation and the decentralization of decisionmaking authority to the district and school levels. Unable to penetrate the walls of the classroom with state-level mandates, reformers were now ready to exchange freedom from regulation for increased accountability for results and better learning outcomes at the school site. It is in this second wave of reforms, in the coupling of school-level autonomy

School-based management, more professional conditions for teachers, and parental choice... laid the groundwork for the emergence of charter schools.

and accountability, that charter schools have their deepest roots.

In contrast to earlier, more fragmented efforts, reformers now sought to move toward a more radical reworking or "restructuring" of the nation's schools. Borrowed from business, the restructuring concept is modeled on the movement to reorganize corporate America in response to the changing global marketplace (Elmore, 1990; Cibulka, 1990). As business searched for alternatives to complex, hierarchical management structures, it was believed that education should also seek "flatter" and more responsive models of school organization and management.

While restructuring efforts continued to emphasize accountability and the content and quality of instruction, issues of school governance quickly moved to center stage. The most prominent set of restructuring options focused on the decentralization and devolution of authority to the school site—to teachers, individual parents, and students (McDonnell, 1989). School-based management, more professional conditions for teachers, and parental choice were among the most popular strategies for increasing local control of schools. They are also the reform initiatives that laid the groundwork for the emergence of charter schools.

School-based management. Critics of past centralized reform approaches insist that important schooling decisions have too long been made by those unfamiliar with the daily realities of the classroom. School-based management is intended to remedy this problem by allowing those more closely associated with children to make critical decisions about how best to meet their learning needs.

While definitions of the term vary, the school-based management concept involves the formal alteration of governance structures. It is a form of decentralization that recognizes individual schools as the place where change and improvement in teaching and learning occur. Moreover, school-based management depends upon the redistribution of decisionmaking authority as the primary mechanism through which improvement is initiated and sustained (Malen, Ogawa, and Kranz, 1990). Proposals for school-based management often include the creation of a school governing or advisory council which is designed to solicit and use the opinions and preferences of teachers and parents in making critical decisions about curriculum, personnel, and budget. These adjustments in the local education governance structure are designed to promote both greater autonomy and accountability at the school level by granting school participants greater discretion and influence over decisions and by encouraging school profes sionals to be more responsive to the needs and demands of students and their parents (Malen, Ogawa, and Kranz, 1990).

Over the last decade, school-based management initiatives have become common. There is little evidence, however, to suggest that they have achieved desired changes in either governance or in teaching and learning. Studies show that the degree to which "real" decisionmaking authority has actually devolved to the school has been limited. Clune & White (1988) found that, to the extent that decisionmaking authority is transferred to individual school sites, budgeting is the first issue to be decentralized, followed by curriculum and personnel. However, even when authority over budget is delegated, expenditure authority continues to reside with the district.

As a result, teachers and administrators have had little input into critical decisions. In an exhaustive review of the research on school-based management, Malen, Ogawa & Kranz (1990) concluded that, while school-based management generated greater involvement in decisionmaking, it

did not alter school participants' ability to influence policy. Consequently, members of school councils serve as advisors rather than policymakers when it comes to issues of critical importance. For the most part, school-based management initiatives rarely influence technical core issues (i.e., curriculum and instruction). Instead, they tend to focus on more peripheral issues such as school safety, facilities maintenance, and parental involvement (Wohlstetter & Odden, 1992). Moreover, while there is little evidence that school-based management alters influence relationships in the schools, some researchers have suggested that school-based management may actually help maintain more traditional influence relationships among administrators, teachers, staff, and parents (Malen, Ogawa, & Kranz, 1990).

Finally, researchers cannot find evidence of a direct link between school-based management and student performance (Malen, Ogawa, & Kranz, 1990). In fact, school-based management initiatives rarely detail learning goals for students or establish accountability mechanisms that assess the effect of school-based management on student achievement or other performance indicators (Wohlstetter & Odden, 1992).

The failure of school-based management to result in more inclusive decisionmaking is due in part to its maintenance of a bureaucratic school structure. School-based management seeks to adapt the existing bureaucratic structure of schools—through the decentralization of some functions—rather than fundamentally alter it (Raywid, 1990). As a result, school-based management generally retains a bureaucratic perspective, one that restricts school-site decisionmakers to traditional operational issues rather than broadening their influence to more far-reaching policy initiatives (Wohlstetter & Odden, 1992).

School-based management efforts have also suffered from a lack of alignment between state and district policy. Researchers have found that district initiatives often conflict with state rules and regulations. Conversely, state-designed plans encounter problems with district policy (Wohlstetter & Odden, 1992). Consequently, school-based management initiatives often produce mixed signals and confusion for school participants.

In her synthesis of research on school-based management, David (1989) concluded that three conditions are necessary for successful implementation. First, the school must have autonomy with regard to decisions about curriculum, personnel, and budget. Second, the school must be exempted from many state and local rules and regulations governing school operations. Third, there must be shared, collegial decisionmaking authority among teachers and administrators.

Teacher professionalism. While first-wave reform proponents clearly lacked confidence in the abilities of teachers, later reformers relied on the wisdom and commitment of teachers to improve student performance (Johnson, 1990). A series of reform reports argued that the solution to problems with teacher quality would not be found in mandates from the state, but rather in enhanced professional working conditions for teachers (Carnegie Task Force on Teaching as a Profession, 1986; National Governors' Association, 1986; The Holmes Group, 1986). They reasoned that, with the creation of a more professional workplace, schools would not only be able to attract and retain more competent teachers, but morale and job satisfaction would improve for existing teachers as well. Greater job satisfaction would foster commitment, which in turn would raise the quality of instruction and lead to improved student performance.

Proposals to enhance teacher professionalism have involved a wide variety of initiatives. These include the definition of a body of professional knowledge and practice, the creation

of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards and similar state standards boards, a call for the reorganization of schools to promote more productive working and learning environments, and a differentiated staffing structure for teachers. Others have insisted that regular access to professional development activities, collegial control over hiring and evaluation, and stronger ties to professional organizations also are necessary for the cultivation of teacher professionalism (Sykes, 1990).

By definition, professionalism assumes the possession of a specific body of knowledge and the application of that knowledge in a non-routine way. Professionals need autonomy in order to exercise professional judgement and meet the individual needs of their clients. For teachers, autonomy means the ability to exercise their best professional judgement in the classroom with regard to the diverse learning needs of students. It also means participating in decisions about how best to organize schools for the most efficient and effective delivery of instructional services (McDonnell, 1989).

Redesigning roles, responsibilities, and conditions of work to allow teachers to act as professionals is intimately tied to changes in school organization and management. Granting teachers greater autonomy requires a fundamental restructuring of the ways in which schools make decisions, organize for instruction, provide for collaborative planning and assessment of outcomes, and allocate authority (Darling-Hammond & Goodwin, 1992).

Although teachers are enjoying some increased influence in decisionmaking as a result of school-based management efforts, fundamental organizational change has not yet occurred. Instead, the bureaucratic structure of schools remains largely intact. As a result, more professional roles and conditions for teachers have not been achieved. As Darling-Hammond and Goodwin (1992) point out, there is little use in demanding that teachers acquire new knowledge and demonstrate certain expertise when the organizational structure of the schools does not permit them to use this knowledge or expertise in the workplace. Moreover, the authors note that the current bureaucratic structure of teaching actually works against requirements for professional practice: professional preparation, knowledge for decisionmaking, ethical and codified standards of practice, and attention to client needs. They conclude, "as long as schools remain bureaucratic, teachers will continue to be treated as bureaucrats rather than as professionals" (p. 97).

Parental choice. Prior to the mid-1980s, discussions of school choice largely focused on the use of public funds for private schools through mechanisms such as vouchers or tax-tuition credits. But in 1986, with the release of the National Governors' Association report *A Time for Results*, the debate shifted: the report emphasized the need for greater choice within the **public** system:

> If we implement broader choice plans—true choice among public schools— then we unlock the values of competition in the educational marketplace. Schools that compete for students, teachers, and dollars will, by virtue of their environment, make those changes that allow them to succeed (p. 12).

As a strategy for restructuring, parental choice within the public system is not necessarily viewed as an alternative to school-based management or teacher professionalism but rather as a mechanism for encouraging these kinds of decentralization efforts. Competition, it is reasoned, will force schools to be more responsive. In order to effectively respond, schools must exercise greater autonomy over their affairs. For this reason, school-based decisionmaking and enhanced teacher professionalism are often viewed as by-products of choice. At the same time,

parental choice is critical because it introduces a measure of market accountability into the restructuring equation—forcing schools to respond to the preferences and demands of parents and students.

Often, arguments for choice center on the need for competition within the public system and the benefits of establishing an open educational marketplace. Choice proponents note that most public schools currently have a ready-made clientele. Consequently, there is little pressure to change or improve. In contrast, choice grants parents the freedom to choose from an array of public schools, forcing individual schools to compete for students and thereby creating incentives for improvement. As a result, schools of choice are more likely to be accountable: if schools fail to meet expectations, parents have the option of "voting with their feet" (Young & Clinchy, 1992).

In addition to promoting quality and responsiveness, market forces are also believed to facilitate decentralization and encourage local control. If schools must stay responsive in order to compete for students (and the accompanying fiscal resources), educators must be allowed the autonomy and flexibility to create clear choices for parent and student consumers. This line of reasoning is closely tied to claims about the superiority of private schools and their unique organizational characteristics. In a comparative study of private and public schools, Chubb and Moe (1990) argued that while private schools operate with tremendous site control and increased teacher decisionmaking, most public schools are actually organized to undermine autonomy through broader democratic controls and bureaucratic influence. They concluded that autonomy is the single most important determinant of an effective school—and that mechanisms of the market, rather than bureaucratic designs, are the best way to promote decentralization within the public schools.

Faith in the power of competition to improve the nation's public schools has led to the emergence of a wide variety of choice options and plans—school, district, and statewide (Young & Clinchy, 1992).

Alternative schools and magnet schools. The oldest choices in public education exist in the form of alternative schools and magnet schools. Alternative schools were formed in the 1960s in response to public dissatisfaction with conventional methods of teaching and learning. More recently, alternative schools have been designed to serve students at risk of failure in the traditional system. Magnet schools were established in the 1970s to facilitate court-ordered desegregation. Most magnet schools feature a special theme or specialized programs. Both alternative schools and magnet schools are designed to target a specific student population, and enrollment is generally district-wide.

Postsecondary options. A number of states have also begun to utilize postsecondary options, allowing high school juniors and seniors to attend institutions such as junior colleges and universities and receive high school and/or college credit. Qualifications for participation and tuition support vary across the states. In several states, the local school district or the state pays the students' fees.

Intradistrict choice. Intradistrict models have recently been popularized by "controlled" choice plans which allow students to apply to any school in their attendance zone or within the district, depending on the specific plan. In a controlled choice setting there are no neighborhood schools; all schools become alternative or magnet schools. Programs in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and New York City have been widely documented.

Interdistrict choice. Some states have also implemented interdistrict plans which allow families to choose schools outside of the district in which they reside. In 1988,

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Charter schools are more than just a political solution. They represent the culmination of efforts to reform America's schools.

Minnesota became the first state to implement interdistrict choice—on a voluntary basis at first, but later it was made mandatory for all districts throughout the state. A number of other states have since implemented full or more limited interdistrict choice plans.

Although the number of choice options within the public system has increased dramatically over the last several years, many continue to believe that in order to provide the public with an authentic array of choices, private schools must also be accessible. Recently, tuition vouchers have once again emerged as a viable alternative to public school parental choice plans. Much of the current rationale for voucher programs draws on research claims that private schools do a better job of educating students, particularly those who are academically at risk of failure (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987; Chubb & Moe, 1990). Faced with evidence of a growing achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students, especially in urban areas, many policymakers have turned to vouchers as a last-ditch effort to provide all students with quality educational opportunities.

The use of public funds for private schools, however, is often less about student achievement and more about politics. The less bureaucratic and more market-driven approach of vouchers has traditionally appealed to conservative lawmakers. More liberal policymakers, however, have repeatedly voiced concerns about equity. As a result, vouchers remain a highly partisan issue. In the last five years, voucher bills have been introduced in several states including Arkansas, California, Colorado, and Oregon. More recently, the voucher movement was strengthened by conservative wins in the 1994 elections at both the federal and state levels (Pipho, 1995). Despite this growing support and momentum, Minnesota remains the only state that has succeeded in piloting a voucher program that allows a small number of families to send their children to private schools at the public's expense.

While supporting the concept of choice and embracing a free-market philosophy, both the public and policymakers seem unwilling so far to totally abandon the public schools. Many remain committed to the public schools as the best and most equitable mechanism for providing all students with a quality education. A recent *Phi Delta Kappan*/Gallup poll showed that while almost 70 percent of respondents favor choice in the public schools, only 33 percent favor choice initiatives that allow parents to send their children to private schools at the public's expense (Elam & Rose, 1995). At least for now, the search for ways to apply choice in the public system without moving dollars and students into the private sector continues.

Moving Beyond Theory

As perhaps the first real model for true decentralization and autonomy within the public schools, the charter school concept provides opportunities for school-based change, teacher empowerment, and accountability that past reforms did not. Until now, school-based management efforts were restricted by the need to keep decisions in line with district policy, and school-level administrators had little incentive to redistribute authority. Teachers were often unwilling to take on expanded roles until work conditions (i.e., class size, time for planning and teaching) could be improved. And practitioner or school accountability for student performance was missing almost entirely.

Charter schools promise, in theory, to resolve some of these issues. Freed from most state and local regulations, charter schools can make decisions based solely on the goals of the school and the needs of their students. Designed to provide educators with the "ultimate" professional experience, charter schools allow teachers to start schools, organize schools, run schools, even own schools. Members of a charter school governing board are in a position not simply to influence school policy but to make school policy.

Moreover, charter schools promote both accountability for results and accountability to parents and students—something that is conspicuously lacking in past reform proposals. In exchange for greater freedom from state and local regulations, charter schools must clearly articulate specific student outcomes and outline a plan for meeting them. If a school fails to meet these designated outcomes, its charter may be revoked. In addition, as the only real market-driven schools within the public system, charter schools do more than past public choice options to ensure accountability to consumer demands (Kearney & Arnold, 1994). Until now, market-driven schools have largely been confined to the private sector. Now, charter schools, like private schools, must be responsive in order to be assured of a continuing flow of resources.

For most policymakers, charter schools represent a political compromise. They have emerged as an attractive alternative to doing nothing to improve the public schools or abandoning them altogether. Not surprisingly, charter schools have enjoyed something rare in the current political climate: bipartisan support (Pipho, 1993). But charter schools are more than just a political solution. They represent the culmination of efforts to reform America's schools. Borrowing from both the first and second waves of reform, the charter school concept embodies the values most central to school improvement in the last decade—accountability, school-based change, teacher professionalism, and choice. Furthermore, it suggests a fundamentally different form of governance that is well aligned with past and current efforts to increase local control in all aspects of public life.

Translating theory into practice, however, has never been a smooth or easy process. Charter schools are no exception. Like most reform efforts, the creation of charter schools has involved compromise and debate. As legislators initiate and refine charter school legislation, they are often faced with the difficult task of balancing charter school goals with very real implementation concerns such as funding, equity, student assessment, employment issues, technical assistance, and transportation (McGree, 1995).

Understanding the context within which charter schools have emerged can aid policymakers in this process. The values embraced by the charter school movement are not new. But never before have they been situated within a broader political movement to redefine governance and emphasize local control. As self-governing institutions, charter schools have at least the potential to overcome many of the obstacles that have traditionally stood in the way of authentic education reform. Whether charter schools can succeed where past reforms have failed remains to be seen. The success or failure of charter schools, however, may hinge on the issue of autonomy and the extent to which charter schools actually become self-governing institutions—as such, representing a fundamental departure from the past.

This discussion of the charter school concept is the first in a series of occasional papers, edited by Sue E. Mutchler, to be produced by Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) during the next four years. The SEDL Policy Planning Service intends to conduct a policy analysis strand of work that examines the charter school as a policy instrument for increasing local control and expanding educational options for at-risk students in SEDL's Southwestern Region. The second occasional paper in the series, anticipated for publication in January 1996, will describe and analyze charter school legislation passed in Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, and Texas. Subsequent papers will turn to implementation issues—comparing state application and approval processes, analyzing charter school contracts themselves, and identifying patterns and effects of charter schools on equity and choice in their respective states.

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